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All-Around

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All-Around

by

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Report

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Dedication

To my Papa, my favorite rodeo cowboy.

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Abstract

All-Around

Tony Joe Martinez III

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Don Howard

This report summarizes the development, production, and post-production process of the short documentary ALL-AROUND. Shot in 2014 and finished in 2016, the film was produced as my Graduate Thesis Film in the Department of Radio-TV-Film at the University of Texas at Austin in partial fulfillment of my Master of Fine Arts in Film Production degree.

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Genesis

I first heard of Mac Coleman from my dad. My dad was a bronc and bull rider in the 1970s, both collegiately and professionally. One of his closest rodeo friends was Ron Moore. After having lost touch for many years, in late 2013 my dad looked Ron up and discovered he was living in Kerrville, TX, a town on Interstate 10, northwest of San Antonio. As my parents were soon going to be visiting me in Austin, they decided to pay Ron and his wife Jeri a visit as well.

A couple months later, my dad sent me a text that read “Remind me sometime to tell you about the blind bronc rider. It could make for a good story.” He rarely sends texts and when he does they’re usually nonsensical ones so I gave him a call. He told me about his visit with Ron and Jeri Moore and it turns out that Mac Coleman is their son-in-law, having married their daughter Jody.

I called Ron, whom I’d never met, and he gave me Mac’s number. My initial conversation with Mac went very well. We spoke the year after he had ridden the first full season (2013) since he’d gone blind, and had won the Best All-Around¹ of the Lester Meier Rodeo Tour². Mac’s confidence was high after his successful year and he was looking to improve his skills by going to a bronc riding school in Guymon, Oklahoma. Guymon is a couple hours away from where I grew up in Northeastern New Mexico. I

¹ Best All-Around is an award that encompasses an entire rodeo season. To be eligible, a cowboy must compete in two or more events, with the award going to the cowboy who wins the most total prize money.

² Lester Meier is the stock contractor who puts on the rodeos in which Mac competes.

was going to be in NM at the time Mac would be in Guymon, so we decided to meet there. This was May 2014.

When I met Mac in Guymon, we had a good rapport, and I could tell instantly he would be a great character for a documentary. He had a confident and relaxed presence that drew my attention, and I knew would draw the camera's attention as well. He spoke with the clarity of a man who had been without a purpose for a long time and had rediscovered it. He talked about how he had not only begun rodeoing again, but was going back to school, intent to get his bachelor's degree, which he had never finished – he dropped out of school after the accident that caused his blindness. Mac was completely open to me making a film about him.

Background

I had not planned to make a documentary for my thesis film – I had been intent on making a narrative film. Coming into RTF in 2011, my film experience was in the documentary world. My bachelor's degree was in Broadcast Journalism, and all my training had been in creating non-fiction media. This segued into a Masters Degree prior to this one, which was in Intercultural Communication at the University of New Mexico. Though my MA was a traditional studies degree that normally requires a written thesis, I had a committee that allowed me to make a documentary film instead, as long as it depicted an aspect of communication theory.

I chose to study a particular aspect of the Indo-Hispano culture of New Mexico – *acequias*. *Acequia* is a Spanish word for “ditch.” It refers to a form of irrigation that was introduced to the Southwest by Spanish colonizers – who in turn had learned the practice from the Moors of Northern Africa. It's a simple practice of creating man-made ditches to transport water from a bigger body such as a lake or river for agricultural purposes, like the irrigation of crops or the watering of livestock.

Beyond simply a method of agricultural engineering, however – and more pertinently to my research – the word *acequia* also refers to the communal governance of the various ditches. This makes *acequia* a fluid term, much like the water it transmits. *Acequia* culture is built on the ideal of “shared ownership,” that the water is not owned by one, but is to be shared by a community who also shares in the responsibility of its

maintenance and conservation – ideals that are at odds with typical Western ideals of ownership and consumption.

The film explored the science of *acequias* and the technical aspects of water transmission, the dynamics of the shared ownership principles of *acequias*, and the religious ceremonies of *acequia* villages that occur every year in honor of the *acequia* and to pray for continued rain.

It was the largest and most complex project I had undertaken to that point. It continues to be the longest film I've made, coming in at 33 min. The experience made me wish for formal filmmaking training, and to study the creative process deeper. This is why I chose to pursue this MFA at UT-Austin, a place that had a reputation for a good film program and great independent filmmaking environment.

I wanted to explore narrative filmmaking at UT, which I had never had the chance to before. My filmmaking experience was in documentary but my first love of movies came from narratives as a kid. Narratives were my focus coming into the MFA program at UT.

In the first year of a Production MFA at RTF, we are required to make two films, one documentary and one narrative, nicknamed “KA” and “KB.” We make a single film in our second year (a “Pre-Thesis”), which can be documentary or narrative, and I chose narrative.

Entering the final leg of my MFA, I had planned to make another narrative film. But after struggling to write a script for the better part of a school year, I got nowhere. It was toward the end of this third year that my dad sent me that text about Mac Coleman. I

spent some time considering if I wanted to pursue the film. My plan, after all, had been to make a narrative film. But this was a great story and came at a time when I needed a project. It was interesting and presented a number of areas to explore. I chose to make the film.

Themes

From the beginning, I had several attractions to making this film. I was attracted to the opportunity of exploring how a blind person negotiates everyday life, and to explore how a person comes to grip with having his eyesight taken from him. What was Mac's grieving process? How did he come to peace with the horrible accident that took his sight? How was he able to put it past him and move on with his life?

Over the course of this film program, I had become increasingly aware of the idea that "necessity is the mother of invention." It started with filmmaking. As student filmmakers, we have many limitations on what we can do in our films. We have very limited money and resources through which to tell stories. But limitations that at first seem inhibiting often lead to great breakthroughs in creativity as we must find ways to express our vision that don't cost much money or require elaborate production situations.

This is a simple example, but it illustrates my thought: a scene may take place in a crowded setting with lots of people. How we choose to shoot the scene determines how elaborate the set design must be and how many extras we need to fill the space. Shooting this scene in wider shots is more expensive and time-intensive. We must collect more extras to populate the scene and more of the set must be designed. But we can choose to shoot the scene in closer shots that focus on the main actors and create the environment of a crowded space with sound design, placing the ambient noise of a crowd. Again, a possibly oversimplified example, but it fits.

During this time in film school, I also began thinking more about personal growth. I thought about who I was at this period in my life and how I was the same or different from whom I had been at previous periods. I thought about how my values were the same or different from when I was younger. I thought of others in my life, friends and family, and thought about how they had changed during the time I knew them. I thought about the necessity of growth if we are to become happy, considerate, and contributive people.

As I started filming Mac, we had conversations on and off camera about ways he had changed after losing his sight. With sight, he would often make judgments on people based on appearance that would prevent him from getting to know who they are beyond that initial level. Now that he's blind, he gets to know people beyond that surface level. He told me he feels this has made him a better person, more evolved and more enlightened.

The two major themes that permeated my thought processes during film school – personal growth and necessity as the mother of invention – came together for me in these conversations with Mac. Blindness was forced upon Mac; he did not choose it. But if it had not been, would he naturally have evolved emotionally to a less-judgmental place? There is no way to know. But it made me think deeply about how much we are truly able to evolve mentally and emotionally if left to our own devices, or if radical change must be forced upon us from the outside. This became a driving question in making the film, and an important theme.

Production

Rodeos

I began filming Mac on July 4, 2014, at a rodeo in Leakey, TX. At a rodeo in early June, he had gotten bucked and broken his collarbone. This was his first rodeo since the injury and he was still sore and healing. It had been about a month and a half since I'd first met Mac in Guymon, and I had been thinking about this film and how to approach production for the past several months.

I wanted a strong element of cinema verite in the film. Genuine, unscripted verite moments make for riveting cinema. Because of this, I wanted to constantly be aware of potential opportunities when story details and themes could be captured in spontaneous interactions on camera as I was shooting. Though I wanted to be open to these opportunities if they emerged, I wanted to shoot with intent. When the time came to eventually edit the film, I didn't want to be stuck with an unreasonably high shooting ratio. It was important to me to be selective with what I chose to shoot. This can be a tricky proposition in documentary shooting. I feel it's important to have a strong idea of the story going into production and the focus should be on collecting material that tells *that* story. But it's also important to be cognizant of the fact this is unscripted, and you are shooting real people and events as they unfold in real time. I wanted to be open to different places the story might go.

I have heard documentary filmmakers talk about films they have made and how they began with a certain film in mind that evolved into a different film entirely as interesting angles presented themselves during the process. I understand how this happens, but it has never been the case with my documentaries. I've started working on all my docs with a certain angle in mind, and though often during production and post-production I've explored different directions the film might go, in the end they have always come back to that original idea I'd started with.

I was eager to start shooting Mac. Though the Leakey shoot was the first with him, it was the second I had done. I shot a rodeo in Stockdale, TX two weeks earlier. I wanted to get a feel for shooting logistics, try different shots, and get in some practice before shooting with Mac. It was a wise choice. It was in Stockdale that I discovered how much the stock contractor of these rodeos, Lester Meier, would allow me to shoot. The answer was everything. I asked him where I was allowed to shoot and he told me I could shoot wherever I wanted. I would come to discover he really meant it. I shot behind the bucking chutes where the horses and bulls come out. I shot inside the announcer booth. I shot in the arena itself, with bucking horses running all around me. I kept waiting for Meier to tell me I couldn't shoot somewhere and he never did. I had no limitations on what or where I could shoot.

This unrestricted access gave me great freedom of choice for the film's aesthetic. I decided I wanted a large portion of the shots to be tight frames. Close-up shots create intimacy with characters. Mac is not an emotional person and talks about the accident that caused his blindness very matter-of-factly. He very much fits the popular image of

the American cowboy – a stoic man of few words. I wanted the audience to get to know Mac as a person and not simply from an observational standpoint. The visual intimacy created through tighter frames would aid the audience in identifying with him.

That first shoot with Mac in Leakey was very successful and yielded great material. Because of my experience in Stockdale, I had a sense of how to move around the space of the rodeo and where I might get good shots. The Leakey footage proved to be some of the most dramatic footage I shot of Mac. He fell hard off his horse and lay motionless on the ground for a good 30 seconds. Everyone in the arena worried he'd suffered a head injury. It turned out he had fallen hard on that still-healing collarbone. He was helped out of the arena and to the nearby ambulance on standby. He'd lost his boot in his fall and had a mouth full of dust but insisted to the medics he was okay. It was this footage in Leakey that became the opening scene of the movie.

I left the Leakey shoot exhilarated. Mac didn't have a successful ride but I knew I had some great material and it felt good to be underway. We went to a rodeo in Del Rio, TX the next day. Mac came, even though he wasn't going to ride because he'd just re-injured that collarbone. Del Rio was a nice shooting location. It had a great rodeo arena and the drier environment down by the border provided very cinematic shots when dust filled the air and changed the color of the arena lights. I shot a lot of nice footage here for potential B roll but none of it made it in the film.

The following two weekends brought the Mason and Cuero rodeos. Mac was bucked in Mason but rode in Cuero. In the week between Mason and Cuero I spent a couple days at Mac's place in Kerrville doing the first of three interview sessions. He

recapped his year to that point and contrasted it to the year before, when he'd won the Best All-Around title. This interview footage came to make up the second scene of the film, following the opening in Leakey.

Also in Cuero was the bronc ride of Ron Moore, Mac's father-in-law and my dad's old rodeo buddy. Sixty-five years old and having not ridden in 30 years, Ron accepted Mac's challenge: "If I can ride blind, you ought to be able to ride at 65." Ron got bucked. Though it was an unsuccessful ride, it provided great footage and wound up in the film.

The final two rodeos I shot with Mac were in Johnson City and Brady, and he got bucked in each. It was in Brady that Mac got the most emotional of any point during filming. He talked about feeling like he'd lost 10 years of his life after losing his eyesight and now that he was rodeoing again, he "felt like he'd started living again." This interview footage was in the final scene of the film, intercut with his ride in Cuero.

I shot two more rodeos after Brady, in Tilden and Hondo, but Mac didn't ride in those. For the Brady, Tilden, and Hondo rodeos, I brought in a second camera, a higher frame-rate camera to shoot overcranked slow-motion footage. Caleb Kuntz manned this second camera and I tasked him to get footage for use in potential sequences where we might enter Mac's head and mindset. I nicknamed this the "pretty footage."

At the end of the rodeo season I had only captured one successful bronc ride by Mac. I was a little worried about what kind of story I would be able to tell with only one successful bronc ride. This was supposed to be Mac's comeback story, after all. But my documentary experience has taught me to stick to my guns. When I make a film, I've

contemplated and researched it enough to know there is a story there. And I knew there was a story to be found in the footage, plus I still had more to collect.

Interviews

After the rodeo shooting was done, I did the second and third interview sessions with Mac at his place in Kerrville. It was during the second session that I finally asked him to tell the story of the accident that caused his blindness. This was in October 2014. At that point it had been 6 months since I first talked to him, 5 months since I first met him in person, and 3 months since I started shooting him. From the beginning of my formulation of a shooting plan I decided I wanted to wait a while until I asked Mac to talk about the accident. I wanted us to grow familiar and comfortable with each other before I went into that more personal realm. In retrospect I don't know if waiting made any difference in the way he spoke about it. He was matter-of-fact about what happened and there was no change in his voice. He spoke very unemotionally about this very violent event that happened to him. Mac said he didn't know why his friend had shot him, and his friend didn't know either. And Mac didn't care to know because it didn't matter anymore. "It's not going to bring my eyesight back, so what's the purpose?" he said.

This response wasn't quite what I had expected. From our conversations, I knew he had moved on from the incident but I expected some anger to still be left when he talked about it. I thought he would still have some emotional scars after such a violent and traumatic even. And Mac was indeed angry about it for many years, but those years

were in the past, and it wasn't until this interview that I realized he really had come to peace with it.

The filmmaker in me was a little disappointed. Stories need emotion, and when it comes to documentary filmmaking, there is a part of us that roots for sadness, anger, or pain. It's an unfortunate part of us, because we're dealing with the lives of real people, not fictional characters, but we also understand what makes for compelling drama.

I remember driving home after this interview and knowing I would be doing Mac and this story a great disservice if I tried to sensationalize the event in any way. Anger may be the more immediate and accessible emotion but acceptance is more evolved, and a film that showed his acceptance would have a more lasting impact on an audience.

During the second interview session, Mac and Ron worked in the garage customizing Mac's new bareback rigging. Much of this footage found its way into the film. The garage was used as the one consistent location that threaded the film's different locations and sections together. Mac had bought this rigging after the rodeo season was done and was getting it ready for next season, but we cut it as though it was during the season and he was preparing it for the next rodeo.

I entered these interview sessions with the intention of filming Mac doing various activities, emphasizing his hands and how he feels objects. So much of his world depends on tactility, more so than with sighted people. I wanted to have many close frames of his hands as he performed various tasks, to emphasize the importance of touch in his world and to keep with the aesthetic of tighter frames. The garage and the work he and Ron were doing gave great opportunity for this. I filmed tight shots of Mac's hands as

adjusted the straps on his saddle and as he showed Ron how he wanted his bareback rigging built. These are some of my favorite shots in the film and some of the most physically intimate.

Photoshoot

The final shoot had the biggest crew. Whereas for most of the rodeos and interview shoots I shot alone, I wanted to hold a special shoot to get more “pretty footage” that could be used in experimental sections to recreate Mac’s mindset or to use as transitional footage. Mac and some of the other cowboys planned to gather Lester Meier’s horses for a practice session in December 2014. I told Mac I wanted to shoot it, that I wanted to do some of it at night and bring in lights to light it specifically. He said it sounded like a photoshoot, which came to be the shoot’s nickname. I brought in Caleb Kuntz, Matt Koshmyrl, Jim Hickox, and Aaron Berecka to work on it. Caleb, Matt, and Jim would be shooting with different cameras, and Aaron would light the night scene.

I wanted to shoot a bit of it on actual film. Before this program I had never worked with real film, and did not see the value in it. Hearing older generations of filmmakers lament the disappearance of film had always sound to me like living in the past. But my KB film was required to be shot on film and it was through this process that I came to see the beauty of the image it creates and the value of the experience of shooting on it. Because the costs are much higher with film than digital, it forces discipline in planning shoots in a way digital does not. I felt the shots on film – to be used

in abstract sequences or perhaps the film's intro, could enhance the rustic world in which the film takes place. We shot 300 feet of Super 16mm film at the photoshoot.

The shoot yielded some great footage from all the cameras, but unfortunately none of it was able to find a home in the final film.

In the Moment

Mac talks in the film about how his blindness has made him more in tune with his surroundings. Being present, being “in the moment” – where our bodies and minds are in the same place at the same time – is difficult. Too many thoughts permeate our mind and demand our attention that we spend large parts of our days and lives thinking about things other than what we are doing.

Mac pays close attention to the details of what he hears, smells, and touches. He must concentrate on these things in order to have his bearings and wits about him. He told me stories about how he’s noticed things his sighted companions haven’t, that he is often able to tell the details of a space when others can’t, and tell when people on the other side of a room are getting angry. He did not have this level of focus before he lost his eyesight. His blindness forced it upon him.

He cited his awareness of surroundings as another example of how his blindness has made him a better person. He feels more connected with his surroundings and with those around him because he pays attention to the details far more closely than he used to.

This idea of increased awareness, of being “in the moment,” caused me to reflect on a reason I love documentary shooting. Focus is required in shooting scripted material, no doubt, but it is especially crucial in documentary where you are never sure what will

happen from moment to moment. You must be aware of what his happening around you so you can adjust and be ready to shoot anything.

So much of today's world is built around taking us out of the moment. Mass media comes at us through so many different channels than in previous generations and has created fragmented trains of thought. It is difficult to focus in today's world, and I appreciate the opportunity documentary filmmaking gives me to focus on what I am doing. The need to focus is forced upon me and makes me much more aware of my surroundings and what I am doing.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

Post

In Spring 2015 all the footage had been shot and it was time to start postproduction. As much as I love the editing process in theory, in practice I often feel overwhelmed by it. Especially with a documentary film where you don't have a script to make an initial cut from.

I began by watching every piece of footage – around 25 hours in all – and breaking it down into subclips. I kept the footage organized by shoot (the various rodeos and interview sessions). I made notes as I went through about which clips and shots stood out to me the most. I also recorded ideas for sequences I wanted to edit that came to me as I watched everything. This process – thoroughly going through every piece of footage and describing it – was invaluable. It gave me a great sense of the material I had and what was strongest.

I began some preliminary edits of sequences near the end of that spring semester and during the summer. I did not receive funding from the RTF department in the Fall 2015 so I decided to take a semester off from school. I got a job at my apartment complex and put the film on hold for a few months. This was a much-needed break. Though the film and needing to finish it never left the back of my mind, I enjoyed stepping away from it for a period.

I once again received funding in Spring 2016 and got back to work. I knew I wanted to bring on another editor. Nathan Berkowitz is an undergraduate who helped

Mark Blumberg edit his thesis film. Mark highly recommended him so Nathan and I spoke. He was very eager about the film and I loved his enthusiasm and positivity. He really wants to learn the craft of film editing and welcomed the experience of working on it.

We spent the first couple months of the spring semester getting to know the footage, him seeing it for the first time, me reacquainting myself with it. My original impressions and the sequences I wanted to cut hadn't changed. But I still did not know how to structure the film. When it comes to documentary editing, the approach I have found that works best for me is to group footage by topic and start creating sequences from each topic. Then I start getting a feel for how things move and fit together. The more I do this, the more a structure slowly starts to take shape.

I was continually drawn to the garage footage with Mac and Ron. It was the only verite footage I had with a consistent location. This film would be a portrait of Mac, told through a series of “windows” into him – his backstory, lessons learned, and how he's changed as a person. I did not have footage that provided a traditional three-act structure with a character with a goal and obstacles, so I felt I needed something to ground us and that we could return to through the film as we transitioned between these “windows.” The garage provided that for me. I saw it as a way to link the various sequences and subject together and provide a linear progression through time. Throughout the film, we would visit Mac and Ron in the garage getting the gear ready for Mac's ride in Cuero, which would become the last scene of the film. In reality, the timeline is not correct – the garage footage was shot after the rodeo season and Cuero were well over – but there were no

references to dates or times in the garage footage, and that left us with a lot of flexibility in how to use it.

I cut three sequences out of this garage footage where Mac and Ron were doing three distinct activities and these three sections would be spread throughout the film. I put Nathan to work cutting several of the scenes that dealt with Mac telling us about his accident and his personal evolution. Once we got to work cutting those, the structure began to emerge. We would open the film in Leakey with Mac's ride. We would see Mac getting ready for his ride and getting around smoothly, no hint of his blindness – his blindness would be revealed through the announcer's introduction. We would not see his ride, however – the film would cut to black right as the chute opened. We would hear his ride instead, sound design filling in the details that this was an unsuccessful ride. We would see the aftermath of his fall in Leakey – Mac getting checked out by the paramedics and recapping the ride with Jody – before moving on to a section where Mac recapped the injuries he'd suffered that year.

I struggled for a while on whether I should go into the story of Mac's accident and what caused his blindness after the Leakey intro, instead of having the injury recap section there. I decided to wait longer before we went into the accident because I wanted the audience to spend some time with Mac before we got into his backstory. I wanted people to get comfortable with him before filling in details of how we got to this point. After the injury section, the film moved to the first of three garage sequences and the introduction of Ron.

After this first garage sequence, it was finally time to go into Mac's backstory, for which Nathan made a very good first cut. We also felt we had kept the audience waiting long enough to hear about Jody and Mac's relationship with her, so the accident section transitioned to the introduction of Jody.

Coming out of those sections, I figured we were around the mid-point of the film and it was time to ground ourselves at our "home base" back in the garage. In this second garage sequence, Mac and Ron start modifying his new bareback rigging and Ron tells a story about how he lost his sense of smell in a rodeo accident. He talks about his ride in Cuero and Mac's challenge to Ron to give it one more go at age 65, which we then cut to. I debated for a while if I should include Ron's ride. Would it be a distraction? Did it serve the story? Would it feel like the film was detouring into another topic/character? In editing the only way to know if something will work is to try it, and it never hurts to try. If it doesn't work, it simply means you have found another direction not to go. It did work. It served as a humorous moment in the film and a brief tonal change, and also further colored the world in which Mac lives.

I knew early on I wanted the section about how Mac has become a better person to be near the end. This is what came to be the heart of the film for me, and I wanted us to spend a good deal of time with Mac before hearing in his own words how he feels he is improved as a person. It felt natural to place this section after Ron's ride. It places the focus back on Mac and gets us ready for the conclusion of the film.

There is a triumphant tone to the section where Mac describes how he has changed for the better. My hope is that the audience understands he has worked through

the pain of his experience and come out a better person. The film then needed the right way to wrap things up on this high note. We would visit the garage a final time with the bareback rigging now ready to go for the Cuero ride, which would close the film. In Cuero, just as in Leakey, the announcer gave us a great gift by perfectly summing up the story of Mac and his accident, and we hear it over Mac's ride preparation. But in contrast to Leakey, once the chute opens, we see the entire ride and see Mac triumphant.

Conclusion

As said before, I had not intended to make a documentary for my thesis film, but I am happy it turned out that I did. I explored narrative films during my time in the program and I don't want to say that exploration is done. Narratives provide different kinds of challenges and creative exploration that documentaries do not, and I want to continue practicing narrative, even if that is only on the level of writing. But doing a documentary for my thesis felt like getting "back to my roots." It is my background and continues to remain the realm I am most comfortable in.

Much of the film school process, I have found, is finding what your true strengths and weaknesses are. I enjoy narrative films and I enjoy making narratives but my greater strengths lie with documentary filmmaking and this is what I am more likely to practice going forward in my career.

Appendix A: Stills



Mac Coleman. An example of the type of tight frames I wanted of him.



Jody Coleman. Jody was camera shy but I managed to capture her in some nice verite moments.



Ron Moore. I had not originally intended for Ron to be a character in the film, but his presence and ride in Cuero helped color the atmosphere of the rodeo world.



Caleb Bergeleen. Caleb was one of the cowboys competing on the tour in summer 2014. He wound up winning the Best All-Around title for the year. I shot footage of him and for a time, considered making him a character in the film.



Brandon Banks. Brandon is another cowboy who competed that summer and I also considered making a character in the film, before deciding it would detract focus from Mac.



Mac's hands on bareback rigging. An example of the type of close shot that showcased the importance of touch and tactility in his world.



Mac in Mason, TX; some of the “pretty footage” that didn’t make the cut.



More pretty footage from the photoshoot in December 2014.



Close-up of boot and spur; a frame from the 16mm footage.